

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.

THE TIGER IN BORNEO.

BY

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The close general uniformity of the Fauna of Borneo with that of the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra is a well known fact, and the progress of research has steadily lessened such differences as were, even of late years, supposed to exist. The main conclusion drawn by Zoologists from this circumstance is that the island of Borneo has formed, at a very recent geological epoch, an integral portion of the south-eastern extension of the Asiatic continent; and that, consequently, the animals which now inhabit it immigrated into its area over a continuous land-surface, and were not introduced by those fortuitous accidents which effect the peopling of all ordinary insular tracts of land.

This being the case, it is remarkable that, whilst all the larger mammals of the Peninsula—elephant, rhinoceros, tapir, wild oxen, &c.—are found existing in both areas, the tiger, which is so abundant in the last named district and so peculiarly fitted by its restless habits to extend its range rapidly over a continuous and congenial habitat, should be entirely wanting in Borneo alone of the three great Sunda islands. Borneo, so far as we can see, furnishes the conditions of life suitable for this animal's existence in a degree no less than do the Peninsula, or Sumatra, or Java. And yet, so far from the tiger itself having been observed, not even a relic of it in a fossil condition has ever been recorded.

Mr. A. R. WALLACE has commented, somewhere in his works, on this puzzling fact in animal distribution, and he has suggested that the tiger may have been a denizen of the jungles of Borneo in former days, and that it has subsequently become extinct from causes at present unexplainable. This is, of course, a purely hypothetical solution of the problem. Another one occurs to me—also hypothetical, but also possible—viz., that the tiger may be a comparatively recent immigrant southwards on this side of Asia; and that, by the time it had extended its range to the latitude of the extremity of the Peninsula, the insulation of Borneo from the mainland by submergence of the intervening area may have already reached to such an extent, as to render it no longer possible for the animal to effect a lodgment on the island, even by dint of its well-known power of swimming across wide straits of water.

Whatever the true explanation of its absence, it is worth while recording the fact that there is a widespread tradition of a large carnivorous animal among the tribes that people the North-West Coast of Borneo. Without paying any special attention to these stories, I have yet come across them several times. When visiting the Serimbo mountain in Sarawak in 1870 some Land Dyaks voluntarily retailed to me an account of large tigers (*harimau*) which they had heard described by the old men of their tribe, and in whose existence they themselves firmly believed. The animals, they said, were of great size, having hair a foot in length of a reddish colour striped with black, and they had their lairs in the great caves of the district. This account agreed exactly with another which I had heard from the Balan Dyaks (Sea Dyaks) of the Semunjan river, who declared that a pair of these animals haunted a cave in the Pupok hill. Subsequently I again heard these Pupok tigers spoken of by another party of the same Dyaks, who lived close to the hill. SPENSER ST. JOHN (vol. ii., p. 107), when travelling among the Muruts of the Linbang river, met with a similar story of large tigers inhabiting caves, which he gives at length, and adds the remark, "it is worth noticing that the Muruts of Padas have a great dread of ascending

“to the summit of some of their highest mountains, on account of the tigers which still, they say, lurk in the deepest recesses of the forest.” Afterwards he again met with the same tradition among the Linbang Muruts, but in a different locality, where two rocks about thirty feet apart were known among the people as the “Tiger’s Leap.” ST. JOHN says that he had heard of the existence of tigers on the North-East Coast also, but gives no reference.

In the year 1869, I happened to be staying at the village of the Siinggi Dyaks in Sarawak, and there I lit upon a veritable tiger’s skull preserved in one of the head-houses (*paṅggah*). It was kept with other skulls of tree-tiger, bear, muntjac-deer, &c., in certain very ancient sacred dishes placed among the beams of the roof and just over the fire-place. It was so browned and discoloured by soot and dirt, and the Dyaks were so averse to my touching it, that I was unable to decide whether it was a fossil or a recent skull. All inquiries as to when it had been obtained met with the discouraging response: “It came to us in a dream,”—and they had possessed it so long that the people could not recall the time when it first came into the hands of the tribe. The dish on which it lay was of a boat-like form, and was of camphor-wood and quite rotten. The skull was $13\frac{1}{3}$ inches long by $9\frac{1}{3}$ inches in breadth, measured across the jugal arches. The lower jaw and all the teeth were wanting. The large sockets for the teeth, the strong bony occipital crest, and the widely-arched zygomatic bones indicated that the animal, to which the skull belonged, had been one of mature growth. On a second visit I made an attempt to purchase it, but the people were so horrified at the idea of its removal, that I reluctantly desisted. The chief of the village declared that, in consequence of my having moved the skull on my last visit, the Dyaks had been afflicted by heavy rains, which had damaged their farms; that once, when a Dyak accidentally broke a piece of the bone, he had been at once struck dead with lightning; that its removal would bring about the death of all the Siinggi Dyaks, and so forth. Afterwards the Rajah of Sarawak kindly endeavoured to persuade the Dyaks to part with it to him;

but they begged that he would demand anything rather than this skull, and he therefore did not push the request.

Thus we have in North-West Borneo a tradition of the existence of the tiger common to several widely-separated and very distinct tribes, and we have this skull preserved with so much veneration at Siŋgghi. Now, if this skull were proved to be in a fossil condition, there would be little difficulty in accepting Mr. WALLACE's suggestion that the animal in question once had its place in the Bornean fauna and has recently become extinct. But until such proof is obtained, it is equally possible that the skull was brought from Java and made an heirloom of (as is the Dyak custom), at the time when western Borneo was subject to Majapait, when the intercourse of the Dyaks with Java seems to have been both frequent and considerable. And in this case, the traditions above noted might be explained as having been derived either from the report of tigers seen in Java and the Peninsula by natives of Borneo casually visiting those districts in comparatively recent times; or as handed down from the original colonists of Malayan stock who peopled the North-West Coast and to whom the animal would have been familiar.

Since writing the above, I find that BURNS, in his account of the Kayans of the Rejang river (LOGAN's Journal, 1849), states that these people have a proper name for the tiger, which animal they describe as being of large size, and which they persist in saying does exist in several districts of the interior.
